THE BROWN CREEPER NESTING IN THE CYPRESS SWAMP OF SOUTHEASTERN MISSOURI.

BY O. WIDMANN.

IT was a few minutes after five in the morning of June 2, 1894, when I heard a shrill whistle of four distinct notes, *tsee, tsee, dill did*, something entirely new and not attributable to any bird of my knowledge. The whistle was repeated about a dozen times, at intervals of a few seconds, and it came from a distance of less than twenty yards, but the light of the young day had not yet mastered the gloom of the forest, and when the song ceased I had no idea to what family the songster might belong.

Of one thing I was positive: the notes did not belong to any of our regular breeders. This was enough to arouse my curiosity to the utmost, since I knew that spring migration was over in that region. The very latest of migrants had left it, and only summer sojourners were met with the last few days. A roving flock of Cedarbirds was the only species that had not yet settled down to domestic life. Indeed, fall migration had already begun, if it is allowed to regard the flocking of young Bronzed Grackles into a common roost as the first stage of it. The only hope to identify my bird was by waiting patiently until it would sing again. So I waited near the trees where I had heard the song.

The forest was full of bird song at this early hour and it resembled with its arched tupelos and pillar-like cypresses a huge cathedral; the floor a blinking sheet of water without any underbrush; the aisles resonant with the monotonies of Protonotaria; the cornices tenanted by a choir of noisy Redeyes, Redstarts and Cerulean Warblers, with frequent *veerees* of the Yellow-throated Vireo, and occasional outbursts by an exalted Baltimore or Orchard Oriole.

As time wore on, all birds of the forest had their turn in singing. Now and then the Parula and Sycamore Warblers laid in a few repetitions of their lofty cheerings and the Wood Thrush became loud in the praise of the pleasant coolness of the morning hours.

Overhead were frequent bickerings in the sphere of a pair of Wood Pewees, who were busily engaged in the construction of their nest. There were Acadian Flycatchers with startling exclamations and mysterious wing-whistlings, soliloquies of the Warbling Vireo, effusions by Indigos and Cardinals, innumerable *willitzkis* of the Maryland Yellow-throat, and from time to time a modest opinion by the weather-wise Cuckoo.

As the hours passed on and the sun's rays had destroyed all dimness in the forest, the Wood Thrush turned the leadership over to the Summer Tanager, and the pauses made by the earlier songsters grew longer and longer. Two pairs of Hooded Mergansers, who at first had been much incommoded by my presence and had repeatedly shown their anxiety by circling wildly and with notes of alarm through the treetops, were now visiting their nest-holes without fear. At this season the beauty of the male's dress and coiffure is entirely gone; both parents resemble each other so much that they are generally mistaken for female Wood Ducks, which are also very common breeders in these swamps. Both species breed sometimes together in small colonies and so near human habitations that their coming and going may easily be watched by the people. A lady residing at Byrd's Mill witnessed the act of removing the young from the nest, sixty feet above ground. The young were brought down, one by one, clinging to the back of the parent and holding fast with the bill. That they are clever climbers I can testify myself; I have seen them climb up the inside of a drygoods box, two feet high, holding fast to the planed boards with their sharp claws and stiff tail-feathers.

It was now ten o'clock and my patience was nearly gone. Every noise in the forest had been attentively listened to and every moving speck followed, but in vain. Silence began to become oppressive. I rapped woodpecker-fashion against a half-rotten stump. Almost as if by magic a pair of Pileated Woodpeckers appeared on the scene; a second rap brought them still nearer, evidently bent on the closest investigation.

At the same time the four shrill notes were heard in close proximity and turning in the direction a small bird was seen flitting past and alighting against the trunk of a tupelo a few

feet above the water and only a few yards from where I was half-hidden among fallen timber and stumps. It began to sing as soon as it had alighted and hopping up the side of the tree repeated the strange notes several times. There was no doubt possible, the bird was less than ten yards from me, in good light for half a minute as it went up the tree in its well-known fashion; it was Certhia, the Brown Creeper. My surprise was so much greater since I thought I had become acquainted with the song of that bird during a visit to this region in March, when I had heard it almost daily and on some days quite often.

Of course, I began at once to look about for the traditional detached bark, but there was so much of that article on the old dead cypresses that I had to give up the idea of hunting for its nest. I lingered for another hour, but my patience was exhausted and I left the home of the Missouri Certhia to its rightful owners, including mosquitos and moccasins, both of which seemed to become provoked by my persistent stay.

In May, 1895, I visited the same locality again. I did not meet with Certhia on the first day; but on the morning of the second, May 15, I had hardly entered the swamp, when I heard its song and a few moments after saw the bird, a Brown Creeper, alight against a dead cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) five feet above the water. The tree or stump was about fifty feet high and two feet in diameter. Its base was devoid of bark and on one side the bark had detached itself in a sheet, fifteen feet long and was hanging down like a streamer. Above, the bark was peeling off in shreds, and the whole stump was a picture of dilapidation and dissolution.

The bird hopped deliberately up to a place where the bark was loosened in such a way as to form a pocket, closed above and below and on one side, with an opening of one and one-half inches at its widest. There the bird halted just one second, peeped in, flitted to another tree, and gave a song.

This peeping into that pocket looked suspicious, and I thought I would like to peep in myself. But how to get there? It was fourteen feet above the water and climbing out of question. I had to get a ladder. That was no easy matter, but an hour later I came back with a boy, a small spoon, and a home-made ladder of barbarous weight.

Yes, there was the nest as I suspected; a bulky accumulation of shreds of cypress bark loosely thrown in below, but more and more compact toward the elliptical cavity, which was an inch deep and warmly lined with a felt-like material. Imbedded in, and partly covered with felt lay one egg of white color with fine red dots. I did not disturb the nest and quietly left the place.

At first I cherished visions of such a desirable thing as a full set, but recalling instances when rare opportunities were lost by too long waiting, I returned on the 17th, took the three eggs which the nest contained, sawed off the detached plate of bark, about 8-16 inches, liberated the nest from its imprisonment and my mind from the growing fear to lose it.

The nest had the peculiar structure, by which the nest of the species may always be known from other nests in similar situations, and which is minutely described by Mr. Brewster in Volume IV of the Nuttall Bulletin.

The locality where the nest was found is the Little River overflow, east of Cotton Plant, Dunklin Co., Mo., seven miles from the south line of the peninsula. The flora as well as the ornis of this region is highly interesting. While the botanist finds that the Floridan and Texan floras meet in the sandy fields and swampy woods of the Peninsula of Missouri, the ornithologist who sees the Canada Goose and Black Vulture, the Brown Creeper and Swainson's Warbler on neighboring breeding grounds, is liable to have new surprises at every visit.

Though only a ridge of a few miles in width separates the Little River region from the St. Francis basin, both flora and ornis differ somewhat, the latter mainly through absence from the Little River region of birds which habitually feed on dry ground. The stage of water in the St. Francis is dependent only on the precipitation in the region which it drains; it rises to a well defined height which it reaches every year and from which it slowly recedes in summer.

With the Little River it is different: bayous connect it with the Mississippi and a high stage in the latter pours its muddy waters through the bayous into the Little River, causing a rise of five or six feet above the ordinary yearly overflow. The occurrence of such great floods has been uncomfortably frequent of late; that

of 1893 came within one foot of the highest known to white settlers, that of 1882.

During these inundations the waters remain from one to two weeks, sufficiently long to drown a variety of plants and to kill others by covering them with a sticky coat of mud.

Such floods have been so much more effective destroyers of vegetation as they occurred late in spring, even in June, when submersion is more detrimental than in early spring.

At a certain time the Little River is, as its name says, only a small affair, but it keeps within its narrow bed only during the driest part of the year; in winter and all through spring into summer the width of its overflow is from two to six miles. The large area covered by this regular overflow is the territory most conducive to the growth of the cypress, tupelo (*Nyssa uniflora*), waterelm (*Planera aquatica*), *Acer rubrum drummondii*, *Polygonum densiflorum*, and *Zizania miliaria*, the southern wild rice. Among the shrubs we see the ornamental *Itea virginica*, growing on top of a water-soaked stump, and the interesting cork plant, *Leitneria floridana*, which often attains the size of a small tree.

The young growth is generally thin; so much more voluminous is the debris which covers the ground and which, together with the cypress-knees and stumps left by the lumberman, make progress either on foot or in dugout very difficult in places.

South of the Missouri State line the open river enlarges to such an extent that it is called Big Lake, a region much frequented by all kinds of water birds and a fruitful field for the market-hunter. The merchant at Hornersville told me that in the winter 1893–94 the number of ducks sent to market from the region of Big Lake amounted to 150,000, four-fifths of which were Mallards. One hunter held receipts for 8000 Mallards, killed and shipped by him alone.

It may be that the season was exceptionally good, in accordance with Nature's great powers of compensation. The same agency which destroyed the crops in summer caused the presence of unprecedented numbers of ducks in winter. Even Blue-winged Teals, which were not known to winter in this latitude, remained in small numbers.

All kinds of ducks occur at some time or the other, but the Mallard is the principal duck for winter shooting. Green-winged

Teals are only killed for the hunter's table. Gadwalls are plentiful but neglected, because not in demand on account of the fishy taste of their meat. Spoonbills and Ringnecks are not desirable. Pintails are taken in great numbers in the fall, but they pass rapidly through on their return in spring.

Trapping was the main occupation of the people formerly and is still followed to some extent, but duck shooting in fall and winter, and bullfrog-gigging in spring form now a considerable source of the income of the inhabitants of the region in which the revenues from agricultural pursuits are seriously curtailed by the floods.

The soil is sandy and the products are few. Cotton is the main staple. Corn is raised for home use only and peas for hay. Grasses and clover do not thrive and their almost total absence from the ground causes an emptiness which, to one not used to it, is somewhat painful.

An extra source of income, but one of short duration only, was found when the Egret-plume craze came into vogue, some seven years ago. The Egret, *Ardea egretta*, or White Crane as it is always called, used to be an abundant breeder in the peninsula, and several large 'crane-roosts' existed in the Little River and St. Francis region. One crane hunter told me that he cleared $800 from the sale of his crane feathers, and there were many such fellows busy with the extermination of the 'White Crane,' which these men now consider complete, as far as southern Missouri and northern Arkansas are concerned. No plume-hunting of any consequence has been going on for the last four years, and it is therefore delightful to hear that at least one colony of Egrets has escaped the murderous gun and is being preserved on guarded ground. The owner of the ground is said to be satisfied with gathering those plumes which the birds cast off during the breeding season and which are found in salable condition on the ground below their roosts.